

# Act individuation and basic acts

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One much-discussed controversy in the philosophy of action literature concerns act-individuation: the criteria for deciding whether an agent has undertaken one or several acts. Much of the discussion has centered on what we might call 'coincident acts,' one feature of which is occurrence at the same time via the same bodily movement of the agent (e.g., my flipping the light switch and my turning on the light; my pulling the trigger and my shooting Jones; etc.). What is the relationship between these?

The *coarse-grained criterion of act-individuation* says that I have only performed one act in these kinds of cases; often coarse-grained theorists will say that I have performed one act, which has been given two descriptions. The comparison here is with a single physical object referred to by two different definite descriptions. In response to the question, 'What are you typing on?' I could say either 'the laptop' or 'the computer on my desk.' But the fact that these object can be described in either of these two ways does not show that there are really two objects on which I am typing. Just so, the coarse-grained theorist will say, the fact that we can describe what I am now doing as 'typing on the laptop' or 'producing a handout for seminar' does not show that I am now performing two distinct actions. Anscombe, *Intention* and Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes' are classic examples of coarse-grained theorists.

The *fine-grained criterion of act-individuation* says that my flipping the light switch is distinct from my turning on the light; in the case described, I have performed (at least) two actions. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* is a classic example of a fine-grained theorist.

The distinction here is really a matter of degree. An extreme coarse-grained theorist could hold that coincidence implies identity, and various kinds of fine-grained theorists could posit various kinds of coincident but distinct acts.

We will not be discussing this debate at any length; but it helps to understand the literature if you understand something about it. Below is a brief outline of some of the major arguments on each side.

## **1 Arguments for a coarse-grained criterion of act-individuation**

### *1.1 Argument from parsimony*

The main intuitive argument for the coarse-grained approach is the view that the fine-grained theory multiplies actions beyond necessity. There are really two forms of this argument: (i) the fine-grained approach recognizes the existence of entities which it should not recognize; (ii) the fine-grained approach recognizes the existence of too many actions.

(ii) is the stronger of these arguments. As Goldman points out, the fine-grained theorist does not recognize the existence of any actions denied by the coarse-grained theorist. The fine-grained theorist thinks that there is an action of me flipping the light switch, but so does the coarse-grained theorist; the fine-grained theorist thinks that there is an action of me turning on the light, but so does the coarse-grained theorist; and so on.

The fine-grained theorist has no immediate response to (ii); it does seem odd to say that, just by flipping the light switch, I managed to perform a very large number of actions. But perhaps this argument is not conclusive; perhaps ordinary language (or common sense) should not be trusted on the question of how many actions I have taken in a given case.

### *1.2 The problem of the relationship between coincident acts*

Everyone should agree that coincident acts stand in some very close relationship to each other: whether or not they are identical, my flipping the light switch is closely related to my turning on the light. Any complete theory of action should be able to offer some explanation of what this close relationship is. The coarse-grained theorist has an explanation: these acts are related by identity. So this theorist can offer coincident actions as a challenge to the fine-grained theorist: explain the relation between coincident acts.

It is worth noting that one obvious proposal seems to fail: coincident acts are not related by causation. It is not as though my flipping the switch causes by turning on of the light; rather (one wants to say) they are one and the same event.

Fine-grained theorists have attempted to respond to this challenge by developing a theory of basic actions and the different ways in which basic actions, given a given context of action, can give rise to further actions. See, e.g., Goldman's discussion of 'level-generation' in Chapter 2 of Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, and §3 below.

## 2 Arguments for a fine-grained criterion of act-individuation

### 2.1 Argument from Leibniz's Law

Leibniz's law says that if  $x = y$ , then any property of  $x$  must also be a property of  $y$ . This is relevant to the individuation of actions because it follows from Leibniz's law that if my act of, e.g., flipping the light switch is identical to my act of turning on the light, every property of my flipping the light switch must also be a property of my turning on the light. But some examples seem to show that the identity claims of the coarse-grained theorist must be wrong. (See Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, ch. 1.1.)

#### Effects of actions

John pulls the trigger, and John kills Smith. The coarse-grained theorist may want to say that these acts are identical. But they seem to have different effects: John's pulling of the trigger caused the gun to go off, while his killing of Smith did not cause this.

Similar example: John's playing the piano causes Smith to wake up and causes Jones to fall asleep. Then it is true that John played the piano, that he woke up Smith, and that he put Jones to sleep. The coarse-grained theorist will say that John just performed one action here, which is described in three different ways. But if so, then John's playing the piano and his putting Jones to sleep should have the same effects. But it seems true to say that John's playing the piano caused Smith to wake up, but false to say that John's putting Jones to sleep caused Smith to wake up.

#### Causes of actions

We can run similar arguments involving the causes rather than the effects of actions. Suppose that John answers the phone with a loud 'Hello' because he is tense. Then we have two descriptions of what John does: he says 'Hello', and he says 'Hello' loudly. The coarse-grained theorist will claim that these are the same action. But this seems wrong, since John's tension is a cause of his saying 'Hello' loudly, but not a cause of his saying 'Hello' (since he would have done that anyway, tension or not).

#### Moral properties

Sometimes we also have the intuition that one but not the other of two coincident actions has a certain moral property - e.g. the property of being supererogatory. Goldman's example is my paying Smith back the money I owe him, and my paying him back with silver dollars that I know Smith likes.

#### Temporal properties

Sometimes one of a pair of coincident acts seems to last a bit longer than the other. E.g., the act of pulling the trigger and the act of killing Jones. But then it seems that the latter has a property the former lacks: the property of continuing until some time  $t$  at which the former act is already complete.

#### Other properties of actions

We can think of other properties we can use to run similar Leibniz's law arguments. Consider, e.g., the property of being made possible by some condition. Suppose that I shoot at but miss Smith, who dies anyway of a heart attack. Then we might say that my killing Smith was made possible by Smith's weak heart, but not that my pulling the trigger was made possible by Smith's weak heart.

There are two main lines of response to these kinds of arguments from Leibniz's law: (i) deny the intuitions in which they are based, or (ii) argue that the sentences in question create non-extensional contexts, and so that these are not really instances of Leibniz's law.

For an example of (i), consider how we might reply to Goldman's argument from the effects of actions. Sure, one might say, it sounds strange to say that John's killing of Smith caused the gun to go off; but when you reflect that John's killing of Smith consisted in his pulling the trigger, we can see that this causal claim is not really false.

To see how response (ii) might work, consider the following putative argument using Leibniz's law to show that Cicero and Tully are distinct. John believes that Cicero was a Roman, whereas John believes that Tully was a Greek; so Cicero has at least one property that John does not have: the property of being believed by John to be a Roman. There is clearly something wrong with this argument, since Cicero=Tully. One view about what's wrong with this argument is that the property of being believed by John to be a Roman is not a genuine property of Cicero; on this view, when one has beliefs about an object, the object itself does not figure in the belief, but rather some way of thinking about the object. (So the thing which has the property of being believed by John to be a Roman is not Cicero himself, but rather the way in which John thinks about Cicero when he refers to him as 'Cicero'.)

One way to test whether a sentence really attributes a property to an object is to see whether the singular term referring to the object in that sentence occupies a *non-extensional context*: a place in the sentence such that the truth-value of the sentence can be changed via substitution of terms with the same extension (like 'Cicero' and 'Tully'). The standard example of a non-extensional context is the that-clause of a belief attribution, since it looks like the following sentences can differ in truth-value even though 'Aristotle' and 'the teacher of Alexander the Great' have the same

extension:

John believes that Aristotle studied under Plato.

John believes that the teacher of Alexander the Great studied under Plato.

It is very implausible to claim that all of the above examples can be explained away in this way; causal claims probably do not typically create non-extensional contexts. But perhaps the last example, using the property of being made possible by some condition, could be dealt with in this way. This is because another standard example of a non-extensional context involves modal claims, which say something about what is necessary or possible. For example, it looks like the following sentences could differ in truth-value:

Necessarily, Aristotle was Aristotle.

Necessarily, the teacher of Alexander the Great was Aristotle.

But this is not enough to show that Aristotle was not the teacher of Alexander the Great.

## 2.2 *Argument from the ‘by means of’ relation*

Sometimes when we have two coincident actions, it is natural to say that one did one of the action *by means of* doing the other. E.g., we might say that John killed Smith *by means of* his pulling the trigger on the gun.

But the ‘by means of’ relation seems to be asymmetric (since it seems to follow from the fact that John killed Smith by means of his pulling the trigger that John did *not* pull the trigger by means of his killing Smith) and irreflexive (since it is never true to say that someone  $\phi$ s by means of  $\phi$ ing). But if  $x = y$ , there can be no asymmetric or irreflexive relation which holds between  $x$  and  $y$ . (See Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, p. 5.)

## 2.3 *Argument from the property criterion of act-individuation*

What kind of thing are we saying when we say that John turned on the light? Plausibly, at the most basic level, we are saying the same kind of thing that we say when we say that John is male: we are ascribing a property to an object. The most natural choice for the property, in this case, is the property of turning on a light. But if to say that someone is performing an action is to ascribe a property to them, then it is natural to think that the acts of  $\phi$ ing and  $\psi$ ing are identical iff when one says that  $x$  is  $\phi$ ing and says that  $x$  is  $\psi$ ing, one ascribed the same property to  $x$  in the two cases.

But, once we’re this far, a fine-grained scheme of act-individuation seems inevitable. It is easy to show that the property of flipping a light switch is distinct from the

property of turning on a light: sometimes people have the property of flipping a light switch without having the property of turning on a light. But if the properties were identical, it would be impossible to have one without the other.

### 3 Basic and non-basic acts

The fine-grained theorist claims that when I flip the light switch, I perform a number of distinct acts: turning on the light, turning on the hallway light at 8 pm, illuminating the hallway, etc. But clearly these acts, even if not identical, stand in some very close relation. And it seems that the fine-grained theorist owes us some account of what this relation is.

In response to this, fine-grained theorists have developed the framework of talking about basic and non-basic actions. The idea is this. We sometimes perform one action *by means of* performing another. This, you might think, will give rise to a structure of actions performed by an agent at any given time. Suppose, e.g., that *A* performs actions *x*, *y*, and *z*, and that *A* performs *z* by means of performing *y*, and performs *y* by means of performing *x*. Then it looks as though, among these actions, *x* is in some way the most basic: it is that action which the agent simply does, and does not do via the execution of some other action. Further, it looks as though the best way to give an account of this structure of actions would be to give an independent account of the agent's performance of the basic act *x*, and then give an account of the various ways in which an agent can perform one action *by means of* performing another.

Intuitively, then, a basic act is one that an agent does without doing it by means of doing some other action, and a non-basic action is one that an agent does by means of doing some other action. The goal of the theory of basic actions is to explain the various ways in which one act can be done by means of doing another, and, if possible, to give an independent characterization of the idea of a basic act-token.

#### 3.1 Definitions of basic acts

There is a large literature on basic actions. One clear and intuitive account of basic action can be found in Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, ch. 3.4, which is roughly as follows.

Goldman's aim is to define the notion of a basic act-token: an instance of action which is not done by doing anything else. But he does this by first defining the idea of a basic act-type, where this is roughly a kind of action which can be basic (i.e., tokens of which can be basic act-tokens). A basic act-type is, according to Goldman, one which the agent can typically perform at will without having any specific causal knowledge about how to produce that action.

This will have the result that many bodily movements are basic — I can typically move my right arm at will without having any causal knowledge about *how* to move

my right arm. Some mental actions will also be basic — I can imagine a green field at will without having any causal knowledge about how to do so. Action types which will not be basic will include, e.g., proving the Pythagorean theorem (I can typically do it at will, but only via knowledge that writing down such and such diagrams and formula constitutes a proof) and counting to 100.

It might seem that we can then define the notion of a basic act-token simply as a token of a basic act-type; but this is a mistake, since not all tokens of basic act-types are basic. Consider, e.g., the basic act-type of raising one's arm. I might raise my right arm by picking it up with my left arm and raising it; but that instance of my raising my right arm would not be basic, since I would have performed it *by* performing another action.

Goldman's idea is that a basic act-token is (i) an instance of a basic act-type which (ii) is intentional and (iii) is not generated by an instance of any other basic act-type which is intentional. (Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, p. 72)

Questions about this account of a basic act:

1. Is the definition of basic act-types necessary to the definition of a basic act-token? Would any problems arise from simplifying the latter definition to simply include intentional actions not generated by other intentional actions?

2. What is the utility of definitions of basic action? One idea is that we might have borderline cases of basic action that a clear definition would help us to decide; but this doesn't explain why we should be interested in the first place about whether a given action is basic. A better idea is that we might want the idea of a basic action to do theoretical work in the account of intentional action. E.g., we might want to define intentional actions as basic actions + those generated by XYZ means from those basic actions. It seems that to give this kind of account we need some account of what the XYZ means are. But do we need, in addition, an account of what basic actions are? Why couldn't we just say that  $x$  is a intentional action iff it satisfies some condition  $C$  or is generated from an action which does satisfy  $C$  via XYZ? You might think that a definition of basic action could fill out condition  $C$ ; but not if it, as Goldman's seems to, presupposes the the idea of intentional action. (Further, the definitions of level generation given below do not have the result that an act level-generated from an intentional act is itself intentional; so it is hard to see how they could play much of a role in the account of intentional action this way.) Goldman's idea seems to be that an account of basic action (and level-generation is worthwhile because it can be used in the definition of what actions a person performs; we might then add a further condition on actions which they must satisfy in order to be intentional.)

### 3.2 Generation

'Generation' is a generic name for the ways in which one action can be done by means of another; if  $x$  is done by means of  $y$ , then we say that  $x$  was generated by  $y$  (along, usually, with certain external factors).

Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action*, ch. 2 gives some useful classifications of ways in which one act can generate another:

*Causal generation.* An agent performs a certain action  $\phi$  which causes an effect which qualifies the agent as performing a further action  $\psi$ . E.g.: an agent flips the switch, which causes the light to go on, and qualifies the agent as having turned on the light. (Causal generation is not causation; the act of flipping on the light switch causes the light to go on, and causally generates the action of turning on the light; but the act of flipping the light switch does not cause the action of turning on the light.)

It is worth noting that it does not follow from the fact that an agent intentionally  $\phi$ s and the fact that his  $\phi$ ing causally generates a further action  $\psi$  that the agent intentionally  $\psi$ s. I might flip the switch, which causes the house to catch fire; it is true that I set the house on fire, but false that I did so intentionally.

*Conventional generation.* Sometimes I can  $\psi$  by  $\phi$ ing in some situation in which  $\phi$ ing counts as  $\psi$ ing. E.g.: I might wave at someone walking down the street; given the context, this waving will count as greeting them. So we might say that my action of greeting someone is conventionally generated by my action of waving (along with certain social conventions or rules). A more straightforward example: moving a chess piece, and checkmating someone. (This is more straightforward because it seems plausible that waving could fail to be an instance of greeting, even in the presence of the right social conventions, if I have the wrong kind of intentions – e.g., to distract them, or to make fun of the way that they wave. It is an open question to what extent cases of what seem to be conventional generation in fact depend on the intentions of the agent as well as on the relevant customs or conventional rules.)

*Simple generation.* In some cases, it follows from the the fact that an agent has  $\phi$ d along with some accompanying condition, that the agent has also  $\psi$ d; and the extra condition needn't be a social convention. Goldman's example is that John may have performed the action of jumping longer than Jim just by jumping 18 feet (along with the accompanying condition that Jim only jumped 15 feet). In this sense, you can think of conventional generation as a special case of simple generation, where the accompanying condition is a social rule or convention (or, occasionally, a moral rule).

One possibility is that the complications noted above with the case of waving should be understood as cases where the accompanying conditions are mental states of the agent, rather than external facts.

*Augmentation generation.* We sometimes credit agents with actions which are just fuller descriptions of other actions. E.g., I go for a run; I go for a run at a certain time; I go for a run at a certain time at a certain speed; etc.

## References

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